The Human Ecology Commons—the expansive interior space linking historic Martha Van Rensselaer Hall and the new Human Ecology Building—is fast becoming the heart of the college. It’s a place where “you feel comfortable taking your shoes off,” according to senior associate dean for research and graduate education Kay Obendorf.

With its adaptable furniture, cloud-like ceiling forms, abundant natural light, sustainable features, and interactive media wall, the Commons offers a relaxed atmosphere that invites students, faculty, staff, and visitors to gather and connect. There’s a dining area with spillover seating from Martha’s Café, which, during frigid Ithaca winters, will be a refuge for students traveling to and from the North Campus residence halls. At 5,000-plus square feet, the Commons can accommodate everything from large gatherings and special events to impromptu late-night study sessions or lunch meetings.

To get every element of the Commons just right, the college turned to a team of experts—its own senior interior design students in the Department of Design and Environmental Analysis (DEA). Their charge: to work with college administrators, facilities professionals, and architects at Gruzen Samton to plan a space that reflects such core values of Human Ecology as sustainability, accessibility, research, innovation, and community.

Also on the list: a one-of-a-kind space. “We wanted to create something that was unique to Human Ecology, that didn’t look like anywhere else on campus,” said Kristin Malyak ’10, MS ’11, one of the student designers. “We wanted something people would notice the instant they walked in.”

No doubt they succeeded—the result is “the perfect community space our college has always needed,” said Alan Mathios, the Rebecca Q. and James C. Morgan Dean of the College of Human Ecology. But the path was not easy. By the end, the students had performed extensive research on the current and future needs of the college, taken significant creative risks, and grappled with the pressure to deliver within budget on a highly complex project.

“Every decision the students made has a critical argument behind it, and every design element was carefully researched and planned,” said DEA lecturer Leah Scolere, who led the senior interior design studio that planned the Commons. “The students approached the project with the idea of creating a design that resonates with the culture of the college and anticipating how the space will be able to evolve as the college evolves.”

‘Living-Learning Lab’ approach lets students imagine the hub of the Human Ecology community.
Design for students, by students

Ever since the north addition of Martha Van Rensselaer (MVR) Hall closed suddenly in 2001 due to structural deficiencies, the college lacked a location for students, faculty, and staff to come together. Planners at the State University of New York Construction Fund eagerly financed the new building, with its great capacity to support teaching, research, and outreach critical to the college’s mission. But the state plans did not include the Commons, so the college allotted funds specifically for the space.

“The college leadership saw community as a definite need and made the investment for the Commons to be part of the new building project,” said Kristine Mahoney, director of facilities and operations management. With the college committed to the new space, Mahoney and Scolere agreed to an exceptional class project for Scolere’s senior studio: defining a vision for the Commons interiors in conjunction with Gruzen Samton.

Mahoney did not hesitate to entrust the high-profile project to a group of undergraduates. Mahoney and her team had collaborated with students on Lounge 159, a custom-designed study space that opened in 2007 in the west addition of MVR Hall. Facilities planning and management students have also interned with Mahoney’s team, studying how to make the college’s physical plant and ongoing renovation projects more environmentally friendly.

By making students active partners in facilities and operations—a core function of the college—Human Ecology gives them a rare academic experience. This so-called “Living-Learning Lab” method allows undergraduates to research, plan, and enhance the same facilities where they gather and study.

“The sheer act of seeing the building in which one works and lives in schematic, 2-D form via plans and sections is a critical learning experience that helps students translate from the abstract to the real,” Mahoney said.

“The students approached the project with the idea of creating a design that resonates with the culture of the college and anticipating how the space will be able to evolve as the college evolves.”

—Leah Scolere

The clouds above

In January 2010, as Scolere’s class set to work on the Commons, they faced many challenges: how could their design help link two buildings erected almost 80 years apart? How would the class align their ideas for the space with the architects’ vision? In what ways could they incorporate sustainability into every aspect of the design? Perhaps most vexing was the question of how to make the Commons more intimate, with its 21-foot-high ceilings and long, narrow footprint.

“We were struggling with how to bring the scale down to a more human level,” said student Courtney Cheng ’10, MA ’11, “so it wouldn’t seem like this big, empty room.”

Cheng sketched her basic idea for a solution, varied ceiling heights that would make the space less cavernous and more conducive to human interactions. Cheng’s inspiration grew into the space’s signature element: the translucent, asymmetrical clouds layered beneath the “starry night” ceiling lights specified by the architects.

The mesh cloud forms are innovative and visually stunning, but that’s not the only reason the students recommended them. They first analyzed a host of alternatives, with shipping, installation, and maintenance influencing the final material choice. The students selected Kaynemaile, a New Zealand company that makes a fully recyclable mesh that’s been used for oil spill cleanups, to custom-build the pieces. Its polycarbonate netting is lightweight, making shipping easy and sustainable, and could be installed without additional structural supports on the roof deck.

“It took them a while to get it right, but the final solution can be traced back to the diagram Courtney first created of the ceiling,” Scolere said. “She fought for the need to add the human scale and would not let that idea die.”

Such insights came from the teamwork approach cultivated by Scolere, who organized the class as if they were a
A varied ceiling height will help bring down the scale of the space to a more relatable level; it will also help define the areas of usage within the space.

Textiles are inspired by timeless patterns in fashion.

These patterns are continuously interpreted in fashion, allowing us to design year after year. Creating materials from recycled textiles allows us to contribute to the sustainability of the human ecology and our environment. They are constantly evolving, with new colors and designs every season. From fabric to furniture, textiles are an expressive family that works best in the following environments.

Making their pitch

In their first proposal for the Commons, Abbey Kesten '10 and two classmates advocated for a design that would encourage users to linger and interact, what they called “the
slow concept.” They created a 27-page narrative filled with renderings, design philosophies, options for materials, and critical arguments in support of their vision. But the real challenge, Kesten found, was winning over her clients. “If I learned one thing from the Commons project, it was that a design is only as good as its presentation,” said Kesten, now an interior designer at STUDIOS Architecture. “Clients are not mind readers, and the better you convey your ideas, the more they understand the incredible designs you have envisioned. I became half designer, half saleswoman.”

A few weeks into the semester, each of the four teams presented detailed proposals to explain their “Big Ideas” and to give recommendations for lighting, furniture, accessories, ceiling solutions, communications needs, and other elements. “They explored techniques to help the client imagine the possibilities of the Commons and to create buy-in,” Scolere said.

Two proposals advanced after the initial presentations, and the students consolidated into two five-person teams to work on the most promising concepts. “The experience was very real to the professional world,” said Scolere, a DEA alumna who worked for five years as an associate at Gensler, a global architecture firm. “There are many times where you’ll be asked to switch teams and to identify your strengths and weaknesses so you can figure out how to contribute to the project. For seniors preparing to go from college to the workplace, it’s a critical skill to be able to adapt your thinking and work on teams effectively.”

As the studio progressed, the students strengthened their proposals with independent research. They did spatial analyses of other community spaces on campus to study peak traffic periods and usage patterns. The groups also investigated a comprehensive materials palette—recommendations for sustainable, innovative materials that would respond to the surrounding architecture.

By semester’s end, the teams had developed two distinct options for the Commons floor plan. To solve the problem of connecting old and new structures, both concepts called for three overlapping zones to provide subtle transitions of form, materiality, and function. Nearest MVR Hall and Martha’s Café is the dining area, in the center is the “formal living room,” and closer to the new Human Ecology Building are pause points and open space meant to spur informal interactions. “One of my favorite aspects of the project was the similarity between the two solutions because it showed how well both teams listened to their clients,” Kesten said. “Furthermore, we created two unique solutions stemming from diverse concepts that ultimately fulfilled the same requirements. The resulting options left the clients with a pretty incredible choice in front of them.”

Both plans were met with great approval by the college leadership in May 2010. Still, it seemed the hard work was just beginning. That summer, the college hired Scolere as a design consultant, along with Cheng, Malyak, and Erin Johnson ’10, a third student from the studio, as interns. The team met regularly with Mahoney to create a final proposal that blended the best ideas from the two class concepts. Mahoney connected them with consultants and manufacturers’ representatives to refine the design detailing and develop
final specifications for the materials. In discussions with Gruzen Samton, they resolved discrepancies between the studio vision for the Commons and the building floor plan.

“What made it challenging was that the students had architectural plans that they had to respond to and respect,” Mahoney said. “They had to work hard to adapt their ideas to the practical realities of the project.”

Cheng, Malyak, and Johnson presented their final plan for the Commons interiors to the college leadership in late August 2010. Their vision was met with great excitement, and it has ultimately served to transform the space into one that is uniquely Human Ecology.

“The students brought an intense passion to the project, knowing that they had the chance to work on a space for the entire college community,” Obendorf said. “They also added a deep understanding of the values of the college and brought the perspectives of students—the primary users of the space. The students pushed the college to be more creative and progressive and contributed ideas to the project that no outside consultant could.”

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